



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE
COMMUNITY RELATIONS SERVICE
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20530

- 1966 -

REMARKS OF ROGER W. WILKINS
DIRECTOR, COMMUNITY RELATIONS SERVICE
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE
before the
NEW YORK CONFERENCE ON COMMUNITY VALUES AND CONFLICT
May 5, 1967

As I thought about this talk, I thought a great deal about the title of your Conference, Community Values and Conflict, and I decided that my message for you ^{is} a very simple one.

Most Americans, when thinking about community conflict, give peace in our cities a high, if not the highest, value. My message to you is this: that value is wrong - peace alone will not produce a viable and healthy American communities. It is true that peace - or order - is a prime prerequisite for a just society. But it should, by now, be equally clear that there can be no real peace where there is no justice, or at least, an earnest and diligent effort to achieve that justice.

Unfortunately, most of us in this country fail both in perceiving appropriate community values and in developing the kind of commitment to justice that will save us from the community conflict that so many Americans seek so ardently to avoid. To continue these failures is to continue our annual perilous journeys from June to September and, more significantly, to continue to squander large portions of our people and great chunks of the quality of urban life - if not urban life itself as we know it.

How did we get where we are? Is there a way out? I can assure you that the first question is a good deal easier than the second. Thus, I will dwell at length on the first and try to duck the second.

It seems to me that both values and commitment flow from perception, from knowledge, from understanding. It seems to me, moreover, that most Americans know so little about the human dynamics of race in this country that it is almost impossible to build the kind of commitment we need.

Thus, some basic building blocks of understanding must be laid if we are to achieve justice and, thus, lasting peace in American

cities. I won't even try to give you all the elements that need to be understood, but I would like to suggest two of them. The first is that discrimination and prejudice still form the boundaries of the world of poor Negroes - a world filled with incredible pain and almost unbearable anguish. And the second is that most Americans think we have made substantially more progress in race relations in this country ~~than we have.~~ ^{actually}

Let us first look at where we are in civil rights today.

Although the achievements in the field of civil rights have been significant, they have not changed the life of the people who live in the ghettos appreciably. It is true that the Supreme Court decision of 1954 and the ~~subsequent~~ Civil Rights Acts of 1957, 1960 and 1964, ^{r 65} and ~~the Voting Rights Act~~ of 1965 have changed the face of America. Many more Americans are voting in the South than voted prior to the enactment of the 1965 Act. Many more Americans use places of public accommodation on main highways and in large cities, without fear of discrimination, than used them before the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Many more Americans avail themselves of the services

of such agencies as the United States Commission on Civil Rights, the Civil Rights Division and the Community Relations Service of the Department of Justice. White Americans see these and other indications of progress and they conclude that we've practically licked the problem and they wonder what all the remaining shouting is about.

However, if they could look at the hearts of the ghettos in this country, at places called Anacostia, Harlem, Bedford-Stuyvesant, Hough, Fillmore, Lawndale, and Watts, they would see that life in those places has not changed significantly, and perhaps, the quality of life and the life chances of the children there may even have become dimmer in that time.

Figures only suggest how ^{grimly} ~~grimly~~ ghettos still are ~~after so much progress~~. Here are some of them:

- a measurable Negro unemployment rate of about 2 1/2 times that of the white unemployment rate;
- a 27% non-white youth unemployment rate;
- a 75% participation in the labor force by Negro males with the percentage dropping to about 60% in places like Watts; *But count 100% 250%*
- a much heavier concentration of Negroes in menial occupations - *open up looking for work* - nearly one half of the Negro men still work as laborers, janitors, porters, busboys and in similar service jobs; and the Negro male median income is 51% of the white male median income, just as it was in 1951;

- a non-white infant mortality rate, which in 1950 was 66% higher than the white infant mortality rate, but which is now 90% higher than the rate for whites;
- a proportion of Negroes living in substandard housing that is twice that of whites living in such housing; and because of segregation, 15% of the non-white families with incomes of \$10,000 per year or more live in substandard housing, whereas only 3.7% of white families with comparable incomes live in such housing;
- finally, at the height of this prosperity with all our fears about an overheated economy, Herman Miller, former Special Assistant to the Director of the Bureau of the Census states: "The unemployment rate for Negroes ... is greater than the rates for whites during any of the past three recessions."

To many of us in this room, those are only statistics. To millions of American citizens, they are the cold brutal facts of daily life. They are the facts of a world bounded by discrimination and prejudice.

We also misunderstand our problem because we make simplistic and misleading analogies about the Negroes and the Jews or the Negroes and the Irish. Those analogies lead people to believe in finger-wagging solutions which end in sermons urging poor ghetto Negroes to pull their socks up. For the most part, this approach is unproductive and unhelpful.

wrong and useless. America must face the fact that the poor Negroes in the ghetto differ from all other American minority groups. For 300 years Negroes have lived in an environment where the erosion of self-esteem and pride was inevitable. That fact has partially or fully incapacitated millions of people. *Many the city -*

Those Negroes who are deemed to be examples of the ability to escape if only excellence is pursued vigorously, are either very lucky because their families came North early, or they are very strong or very talented or both.

Moreover, even without the pervasive and systematic erosion of self-esteem which invades the most intimate places of Negro life and envelopes little children at an early age, it is more than a matter of pulling up socks. Although we Americans do not wish to face it, race prejudice still stalks every *minority group* ~~Negro~~ but particularly *The N* ~~de~~ cuts at the core of ~~Negro~~ ghetto Negro.

One great current problem is that ten years ago we were probably less willing to delude ourselves about the presence of racial prejudice in our communities. For the poor Negro from the ghetto

however, it is ever present. He sees racial prejudice in the practice of a potential employer who gives him a test which has no relation to the skills required for the job he seeks; he sees it in the mind of a teacher who decides, after one cursory glance, that his child is unteachable; he sees it on the face of a policeman who regards him with suspicion, skepticism and with, perhaps, the notion that he is a current, or at least a potential, criminal; and he even sees it spattered across the face of his more fortunate Negro brethren who regard him as a drag on their life chances, as an embarrassment, as somebody to flee.

There is one more element of understanding that might lead to a commitment to justice. That is that there needs to be a clear American understanding that we can no longer afford the luxury of squandering people. In our rich and lush past we have squandered much. We have squandered our underground resources. We have squandered the purity of our rivers and of the air in and above our cities. We have squandered the trees that have shaded our fields. And, finally, we have squandered the earth in which we have planted

our food. We have learned, or are learning, that as we grow we can no longer afford the luxury of squandering our living and breathing space and of squandering the richness of our earth.

Well, I say to you here today, that we can no longer afford the luxury of squandering people. I say to you today that in this country, North and South, we continue to squander American citizens who are Negroes. And I say to you today, as we destroy those people so, too, do we plant the seeds of the destruction of our cities. For so long as we treat American citizens as hostile aliens, for that long shall we earn their wrath and its consequences.

But unfortunately, for those of us who care about America and her cities, the problem is building. All of us who have lived in ghettoes know that they are killers. In some instances, they kill the flesh - in others, they rip the spirit to shreds. But this has been true for years. There is, however, a new element now. The difference between the ghettoes today and those of an earlier day is that the people in the ghettoes are beginning to feel that they have weight and value in the United States of America, and this is so whether they accept or reject our institutions.

Thus, the real difference between the ghettos of today and the ghettos as we knew them in earlier days is that the people in the ghettos in earlier days died quietly. They did not bother anybody with their anguish, with their fear, with their rendering of their flesh and of their spirit. ~~The Negroes~~ ^{all of} in the ghettos today refuse to die quietly. Their screams of anguish are being heard throughout the country and, indeed, around the world. It is, consequently, clear to me, and I hope it is clear to you, somehow, some way we must now do what we should have done decades ago: we must ~~and~~ ^{with} ceaselessly for justice in the communities across ~~the~~ ^{all} land.

I would hope that you here in this room today would understand that we can no longer have static communities and hope for peace. The surest way to invite community tension, community conflict and busy fire departments, is to have a static community. What must occur in every city around this country is a dynamic process in which a broad cross section of citizens, motivated by an indignation and an outrage at the injustices which exist in our society, are involved in a search for justice.

At this point, I should try to indicate what I think you can do to begin this process in the cities where you live. Obviously, there are a great many things to do. The first thing for you to carry back to your communities is the fact that in our country there are at least two realities. One is the reality that most middle and upper class Americans see and experience during their lives. This reality has green grass, reasonably decent schools, pleasant homes, cola drinks to keep you young and slim, and menthol cigarettes to keep you beautiful by the sea. The other is the reality of the involuntary American racial ghetto; a reality so stark, bleak and brutal that it is practically impossible for Americans who do not live in it to comprehend it either intellectually or psychologically. The fact that there are these two realities poses special and distinct problems for whites and for *blacks*. ~~I would like~~ I would like briefly to touch on the problems for the Negroes and then on those for the whites.

It seems to me that those of us who have experienced that ghetto reality normally expect a great deal from our white fellow countrymen. For them, the radically different world we see *around / No M + by* and lead them into is mind boggling and practically incomprehensible on first encounter. I believe that people who are earnestly trying to comprehend

and to work for decency and ^{for} justice need encouragement and some
medium of patience from us if they stumble occasionally. To educate
rather than to castigate and to separate friend from foe will sorely
test our will and our powers of perception. But, it seems to me,
it is an effort well worth making if we truly seek ^{to save our children} ~~just community~~.

To the white members of this audience I would say: heed
the descriptions of that other reality you have heard here the last few
days. It is real and it is as important to the future of America as
the reality that you have experienced during your lives. It is important
that you heed the ~~national~~ voices from the ghetto - those voices
are telling you about integral and important parts of your community's
life. It is essential to the health and vitality of every community in
this nation that the ~~national~~ spokesmen of those ghetto com-
munities be heeded and have access to the places of power so that
the second reality can become a large and important part of community
decision making. It is up to you here to seek out those voices in your
~~community~~ - ^{community} that you hear them truly and that you heed their counsel.

Beyond those two items, there are large issues of community organization. Without dealing extensively with the point, I would suggest that you might well initiate your renewed efforts in your own communities by developing local conferences such as this one. To the extent that you believe that the ~~limited~~ resources of the Community Relations Service can be of assistance to you, we will try to tender that assistance.

Finally, I would suggest to all of you here that there is no more significant domestic task facing this country than alleviating the pain, the anguish and the injustice which attend urban life today because of the existence of ^{the} ghettos. If we as a nation fail to comprehend the ugly reality of the American ghetto and fail to deal with it, I believe that we will lose something much more valuable than peace in our communities. We will lose a large portion of our ^{our country's} country's soul and spirit. I hope and I trust that this conference has at least given you here a new impetus to strive in your own communities to develop a firm commitment to the achievement of a truly just society.
